

BOOK REVIEW

ROBERT M. VEATCH: *A Theory of Medical Ethics*. New York, Basic Books, 1981. pp.xi, 387.

MEDICAL ethics, a quarter of a century ago viewed as something remote and abstract, has today become an important and necessary instrument for the medical profession. This development was inevitable if we pause to reflect on the burgeoning medical advances that confront us with moral issues which heretofore did not exist. Such areas as fetal research, behavior control, and organ transplantation are only a few examples which have brought us to the realization of our uncertainty about values, moral rules, and ethical principles.

Professor Veatch, who has written extensively in this field, is to be commended on his latest work for it is scholarly and thought provoking. This is a book to be read carefully and merits the time spent. For those with a background of philosophy it will be a refreshing review, and for others it will be an exciting introduction. All of us in the healing profession have to deal with these new problems and it is our responsibility to learn how to accomplish this, not only medically but morally and ethically as well.

During the last decade, the medical colleges of our country—because of their awareness and concern—have begun to introduce courses in ethics as well as humanistic studies. Professor Veatch is aware of this for he is familiar and well acquainted with the medical community. It has already been recognized that our younger physicians are sometimes more sensitive to these situations involving ethical problems and much better prepared to deal with them than their elders who never had this training.

Medicine has traveled far since those early days when the limited traditional physician's ethics served as our only guide. This has been modified and expanded as our world changed. In recent years we have benefitted greatly from our colleagues in theology and moral philosophy who have been collaborating with us. Professor Veatch, I am pleased to say has been one of them.

These well-known principles which he writes about—whether beneficence, justice, honesty or autonomy—have been valued and respected by the profession and would cause little questioning. What may be troublesome to some is whether his proposed covenant would in any

way contribute more than what physicians and patients together are already committed to doing. Yet, even were we to accept this, we should also consider those who are uncommitted, and for them the covenant may prove to be of considerable value and serve to enhance their understanding.

In some way it may appear to the physician that his position is being challenged or threatened when philosophy undertakes a study to assist medicine. However, it should be pointed out that such studies concern themselves with the moral aspects and not the physician's expertise. The autocratic notion of philosophy sitting in judgment should be dispelled and replaced by recognition that we are engaged in a dialogue that has importance for both of us. We are now at a period of history when, because of our accelerated advances, working together is virtually obligatory.

A Theory of Medical Ethics is most highly recommended and will prove rewarding regardless of one's persuasions. It also has detailed notes for each chapter, a carefully prepared index, and an extensive bibliography certain to be appreciated.

STEPHEN NORDLICHT, M.D.